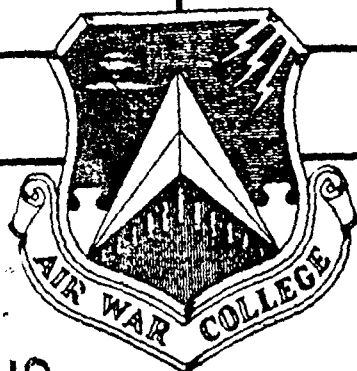


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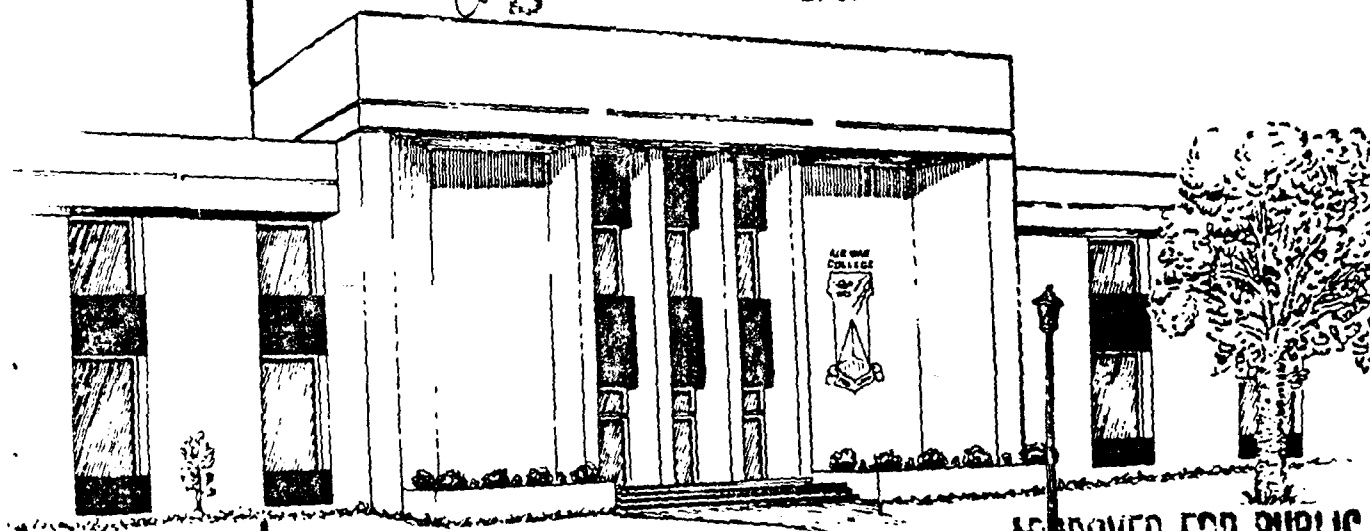
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MILITARY PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY MAKING:  
THE COMMITMENT OF COMBAT FORCES IN VIETNAM

LIEUTENANT COLONEL RONALD N. JACKSON

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MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

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MILITARY PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY MAKING:  
THE COMMITMENT OF COMBAT FORCES IN VIETNAM

by

Ronald N. Jackson  
Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

A DEFENSE ANALYTICAL STUDY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM  
REQUIREMENT

Adviser: Dr. William P. Snyder

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### TITLE:

Military Participation in National Security Policy Making:  
The Commitment of Combat Forces in Vietnam

AUTHOR: Ronald N. Jackson, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

This study examines the role of senior military leaders in the national security policy decisions that led to the commitment of US forces to combat in Vietnam in 1965. It provides an outline of the events leading up to those decisions, including descriptions of the key policy makers in the Johnson administration. Concluding that the military played a limited role in those decisions, the study gives reasons for the military leaders' exclusion from the policy process. Opposition from within the military to the commitment of US forces is also examined. The study ends by seeking implications for the future from the lessons of the Vietnam decisions. A more active role for military leaders and legislative changes are recommended.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Ronald N. Jackson (B.S., US Air Force Academy, M.M.E., North Carolina State University) is an Air Force pilot with a primary background in tactical airlift. His interest in the Vietnam War evolved from a tour as a C-7A pilot in South Vietnam in 1970-71 and the nagging, residual question of how the US ever got involved in that war in the first place. He has also served operational tours as a C-130 pilot, an Air Force ROTC instructor, and a staff officer at Military Airlift Command Headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Jackson is a 1981 graduate of the Air Command and Staff College and is a graduate of the Air War College, class of 1989.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The armed forces of the United States are spending extensive resources preparing their senior officers to participate in the national security policy decision making process. The curricula of the nation's war colleges include entire courses in national security policy studies as well as studies of the political and economic situation in every region of the world. In addition, civilian post-graduate education has become virtually universal among senior officers. In an interview with Time magazine, Admiral William Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, clearly stated the requirements for our senior military leaders:

There are no solely military solutions. So we need warriors who can operate in the policy world as well.... Our challenge is to develop leaders who can fight and manage and fighters who can contribute to policy-making....A man can be a first-class warrior, but if he can't function in the policy arena, that's a serious deficiency in higher commands. (10:73)

With the preparation and willingness of our senior military leaders to participate in the national security policy arena, historical examples of successful and positive military involvement in policy decisions are easy to find. There may be more to learn, however, from an example where the military was denied an effective voice in the process. To do that, this study looks at the military's role in the

1965 decisions to commit US forces to a combat role in Vietnam.

Those decisions were arguably the most important national security policy decisions since World War II, and certainly among the most controversial. As decisions to commit US troops to combat, they obviously directly concerned our senior military leaders. Hence, one would expect extensive military involvement in the decisions. On the other hand, these decisions also involved complicated political problems involving both friendly and hostile foreign governments, as well as domestic impacts, so one would also expect a large civilian role.

This study will examine how the US national security apparatus reached these decisions, and then the role senior US military officers played in that process. In addition, it will examine military opposition to those decisions, and the implications this example may hold for the future.



## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND: EVENTS LEADING TO THE DECISION

In February 1965, President Johnson decided to initiate air strikes against targets in North Vietnam. One month later, he decided to commit the first US ground units to South Vietnam to protect the US Air Force units he had deployed to carry out the air war. Those decisions marked a major change in US involvement in the Vietnam War. Before the 1965 decisions, the US military role in Vietnam was that of advisers to the armed forces of South Vietnam. Although individual American soldiers and airmen were involved in combat activities, they were there to train and advise the South Vietnamese troops that were supposed to do the actual fighting. It was only after these 1965 decisions that American air and ground combat units engaged the enemy. The events leading up to those decisions resulted from a complex mixture of personalities and circumstances.

#### The Policy Makers

When President Johnson inherited the presidency after President Kennedy's death in November 1963, he inherited not only the situation in Vietnam, complete with 16,000 American advisers, but also President Kennedy's team of Vietnam policy makers. It was an impressive team: highly educated intellectuals from the finest universities and the top of American business. It was a team that author David

Alberstam termed "the best and the brightest" in his book of the same name.

The key policy makers were McGeorge Bundy, the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, his deputy and Southeast Asian specialist, Walt Rostow, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Significantly, all favored strong action in Vietnam. Equally significant, none was military.

The only influential military officer in the team was General Maxwell Taylor, who had been a special assistant to President Kennedy and had been recalled to active duty to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Taylor fit the mold of the dynamic intellectuals in Kennedy's inner circle. The other members of the JCS did not, and were not close advisers. President Johnson did not trust the generals. They were viewed as right-wing conservatives in a liberal administration whose Great Society legislation went head-to-head with defense spending. As President Johnson put it, "the generals...know only two words - spend and bomb." (13:137)

The first half of 1964 saw major changes in the policy making structure. Those advisers who advocated a political solution for Vietnam found their position undercut by the political chaos in Saigon following the assassination of President Diem. Subordinates whose views conflicted with their superiors, Rusk and McNamara, found themselves moved

to jobs outside the Vietnam policy area or phased out of government entirely. General Taylor, now retired, became Ambassador to South Vietnam, and his protege, General William Westmoreland, became the commander of all US forces in Vietnam. President Johnson's Vietnam policy making team was formed. As Halberstam described it in The Best and The Brightest, "the brilliant, activist can-do Kennedy team, a team somewhat tempered in the past by Kennedy's own skepticism...now found itself harnessed to the classic can-do President." (11:367)

#### Setting the Stage

Although President Johnson's first full year in office was devoted primarily to passage of civil rights legislation, the development of his Great Society program, and then later to his reelection campaign, the Vietnam conflict was never far from his attention during 1964. In February he issued his first major policy directive on Vietnam, National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273. While it made no major changes in policy, it clearly reaffirmed the US commitment to South Vietnam.

In March, Johnson sent General Taylor and Secretary of Defense McNamara to Saigon to assess the situation. Based on their report, he issued NSAM 288, which authorized modest increases in advisers and provided the clearest statement of US objectives issued during the entire war:

We seek an independent non-Communist South Vietnam. We do not require that it serve as a Western base or as a member of a Western Alliance.... Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance.... that fact accentuates the impact of a Communist South Vietnam not only in Asia, but in the rest of the world, where the South Vietnam conflict is regarded as a test case of US capacity to help a nation meet a Communist 'war of liberation.' (11:432-3)

Equally important, NSAM 288 authorized preliminary planning for air strikes against North Vietnam. The JCS saw this as preparation for implementing an air campaign in the near future. The State Department and the Defense Department's Office of International Security Affairs, however, saw it as only a contingency planning exercise. (13:97) In either case, preparations for an air war against the North had begun.

Throughout the spring and summer, President Johnson received a continuous series of reports on the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. Viet Cong attacks were on the increase and the continually changing government in Saigon seemed unable to meet any of its problems. The pressure to do something to save South Vietnam was building.

This pressure came to a head in August in the Gulf of Tonkin. Although details of the incident are not clear, North Vietnamese PT boats engaged two American destroyers in the South China Sea on the nights of August 3 and 4. Within six hours of the second attack, President Johnson, with the concurrence of his advisers, ordered reprisal air attacks against PT boat bases and oil storage facilities in North

Vietnam. Three days later the President received broader authority for further action when Congress virtually unanimously passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which said in part: "the United States is therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom." (12:203)

President Johnson saw the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as both a validation of his previous policies on Vietnam and as approval for him to conduct the war as he saw fit. He had gained overwhelming congressional support and a dramatic increase in approval ratings in the public opinion polls. He had, in the words of pollster Lou Harris, "turned his greatest political vulnerability in foreign policy into one of his strongest assets." (11:512)

#### The Air War Decision

By this time, the policy makers had decided on air strikes against the North as the proper further action. All the participants agreed that something had to be done to prevent the demise of South Vietnam. No one, not even the leading "doves," Senator Mike Mansfield and Undersecretary of State George Ball, ever seriously suggested letting the Communists have South Vietnam. The question was how to stop them. At the other end of the spectrum, no one was enthusiastic about a commitment of US ground forces. Air

strikes seemed like a comfortable middle ground: enough force to show a tough resolve, but with a minimal number of US troops. Author Tom Boettcher described the thinking:

Bundy, McNamara and the rest had a peculiarly bloodless, cerebral perception of how the air war would be waged. They imagined American pilots diving down into North Vietnam to destroy depots, bridges, fuel tanks and arsenals with surgical precision, leaving Communist soldiers standing around without weapons or transportation. With this neat scenario in mind, they paid little attention to planning for the possibility that Ho would not back down; strategy for a land war was rarely discussed. (12:211)

Despite the deteriorating situation in Vietnam, the Congressional support, and the provocation of a Viet Cong attack on Bien Hoa that killed four Americans, the President was unwilling to take any escalatory steps in the fall of 1964. It was election time, and he was running as the "peace candidate" against Senator Barry Goldwater. He did, however, appoint an interdepartmental working group in November with the "mandate to re-examine the entire American policy toward Vietnam." (12:217)

Since the group was composed entirely of hard-liners, it is not surprising that all their recommendations involved bombing the North. The group developed three options: Option A, the light action, involved more reprisal strikes; Option B, the heavy action, involved bombing the North "at a fairly rapid pace and without interruption" until all US demands were met; and Option C, was a moderate, graduated air campaign. (12:218) These choices were then presented to a select committee of the National Security Council (NSC).

composed of Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, Ball, Ambassador Taylor, CIA Director McCone, and JCS Chairman General Wheeler. Significantly, neither of the military participants, Taylor and Wheeler, had any experience with air warfare. The committee decided on a modification of Option C, proposed by Taylor, that called for a two phased campaign. Phase I would be 30 days of attacks on infiltration routes and limited reprisal raids; Phase II would be a carefully controlled, gradually escalating campaign against restricted targets in North Vietnam that would last for six months or until Hanoi gave in.

On December 1, the select committee formally submitted Taylor's modified Option C proposal to the President. Although there was no implementing directive at that time, subsequent events make it clear that the President also favored that middle road. As Richard Betts points out in The Irony of Vietnam, Johnson found the middle ground both politically and intellectually satisfying--politically, because it minimized opposition from both ends; intellectually, because he lacked experience and was getting conflicting guidance from his experts. (13:109) With the direction chosen, all that remained was a trigger to move the President to action.

That action came after a February 7, 1965, Viet Cong attack on Pleiku that killed nine Americans and wounded 76. Reprisal raids by carrier-based jets were ordered

immediately. Three days later, the Viet Cong blew up an American barracks in Qui Nhon, killing 23 and injuring 21. Again the President ordered reprisals. The next day the Communists attacked Qui Nhon again. The President had had enough. On February 13, 1965, he ordered the initiation of Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained air war against North Vietnam.

#### The Ground War Decision

Up to that point, there had been little debate about committing ground combat forces. The very idea of the bombing campaign was to avoid the use of ground forces. But when US fighters were assigned to Da Nang to carry out the air campaign, General Westmoreland protested that he could not guarantee their safety without US ground forces to guard the air base. The President approved the request and on March 8 two Marine battalions came ashore, the first US combat units to enter the country. Although their actions were limited to defense, it was a major step. As Ambassador Taylor said, "It was curious how hard it had been to get authority for the initiation of the air campaign against the North and how relatively easy to get the marines ashore. Yet I thought the latter a much more difficult decision and concurred in it reluctantly." (3:338)

In early March, the President was nervous about the American strategy. He called in General Harold Johnson, the Army Chief of Staff, and gave him a dressing-down in



front of members of the General's staff. "Bomb, bomb, bomb...I want to know why there's nothing else....you're not giving me any ideas and any solutions for this damn little piss-ant country." (11:684) He then sent General Johnson to Saigon to find some solutions. There General Johnson met with General Westmoreland, whose solution was lots more US troops. On General Johnson's return, the JCS weighed his recommendation. It finally adopted General Westmoreland's request for two US divisions, with the implicit understanding that they be approved for offensive combat operations.

Although the NSC initially balked and authorized only two more Marine battalions, less than three weeks later, on April 21, key NSC members, including McNamara, Bundy and Wheeler, met with Westmoreland in Hawaii and approved the levels Westmoreland had requested. Less than two months later, on June 7, Westmoreland notified the JCS that the situation in South Vietnam was rapidly deteriorating despite the increased troop levels. He felt that an increase in US ground forces to a total of 44 combat battalions was required to stop the slide.

Decisions to increase troop levels were coming rapidly and relatively easily. McGeorge Bundy explained in a memo to the President:

Initially we had grave objections to major US ground force deployments. Even those in favor...wanted to try other things first. When we got major bases of our own, largely for air action, we moved quite promptly to

protect them. These deployments did not give us bad reactions, and it became easier for Westmoreland to propose, and for us to accept, additional deployments. (13:373)

On July 17, Westmoreland was notified that the request for 44 battalions had been approved, with no restrictions on their use. And on July 28, the President informed the country of the decision and added, "additional forces will be needed later, and they will be sent as requested." (12:297) With that, the US was off to war.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY

Looking back at the sequence of events that led to the US commitment, it is clear that the military played a much smaller role than top civilian advisers in the decision process, that their advice was rarely heard at the highest levels, and that when it was heard, it was not heeded. The reasons were both numerous and complex, and can be traced back to the personalities and structure of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' national security policy apparatus.

#### The Military's Status in the Decision Making Structure

The Kennedy team of top policy makers, the "best and brightest," were the products of "enlightened" Ivy League schooling. They were relatively young and affluent, with political leanings that ranged from liberal to leftist. Their experience and education led them to pursue innovation and new cures for the world's problems.

They had all served in World War II: McNamara as an operations analyst on the B-29 program, Rusk as a staff officer in New Delhi and Washington, Rostow as a analyst picking targets for the bombing in Germany, and Bundy as an aide to an Admiral who participated in the planning for D-Day. As a result, they felt experienced in military

matters, and confident in their abilities to manage military operations.

The generals and admirals, on the other hand, were not part of the Kennedy team. They were holdovers from the Eisenhower era, tough veterans of the depression, World War II, and Korea. They were middle-class social conservatives, the products of military academies and state universities.

It is not surprising, then, that the two groups were antagonistic. The military distrusted the civilians and lamented their lack of understanding of the nature of war and military force. That the top civilian's military experience was all in staff and planning positions, not combat, was not lost on the military leaders. General Westmoreland disparagingly referred to them as the "field marshalls" and "self-appointed air marshalls." (6:341) The civilians considered the military officers old fogies who were prone to lead the country into war. Some of the civilians, particularly Bundy and McNamara, were openly contemptuous of the generals and admirals. (12:214)

The position of the military was further undercut by the domination of Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense. McNamara tightly centralized the functions of the Defense Department, making sure everything flowed through his office. He made it clear that all policy decisions would be resolved within his office, and that professional opinions would be subordinated to administration guidelines. (1:142)

He instituted a radical new management style that buried old-fashioned military judgment under computers and systems analysis. In an oral history interview, General Gabriel Disosway, then operations deputy to the Air Force Chief of Staff, stated that McNamara disregarded the JCS and did whatever he wanted; in fact he paid absolutely no attention to the military. (15:208) In 1962 General Disosway was sent on a fact-finding trip to Vietnam. His report, which he said "disagreed with everything that was being done," was received without comment by McNamara, who promptly ordered all copies destroyed. (15:203)

The one exception among the senior military officers was the "Kennedy general", Maxwell Taylor. David Halberstam described him as "almost invented for the Kennedy years." (11: 201) He was articulate, handsome, athletic, spoke several languages, and had written a book. A decorated combat veteran, he had been Superintendent of West Point and President of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts -- "a cultured war hero". (11:201) Most important for McNamara and Kennedy, he was a political general, able to work easily with the civilians and to fit his professional judgments to the administration's policies. In The Uncertain Trumpet he wrote:

A Secretary of Defense needs a strong Chairman to direct the work of the Chiefs, to keep their noses to the grindstone.... Advice can be unpalatable and unwelcome particularly if it runs afoul of political and economic considerations which the administration holds in great store. A Secretary will look to the Chairman

to prevent this kind of advice and to bring forth harmonious views on appropriate subjects which can be used in support of the Department's programs. (21:109-10)

Taylor fit in perfectly with the Kennedy-McNamara team. His support of their policies contributed to the diminished role for the rest of the military.

The arrival of the Johnson administration did not improve the position of the military. As mentioned earlier, President Johnson did not trust the military. He associated the Chiefs with his right-wing political adversaries and saw service budget requests as threats to his beloved Great Society programs. (12:213) He did not admit any of them into his inner circle of advisers, preferring to use McNamara and Taylor to filter them out. (11:593)

This combination of factors left senior officers, particularly the members of the JCS, on the outside looking in on the critical decisions about Vietnam. In a 1965 interview, General Curtis E. LeMay, who had just retired as Air Force Chief of Staff, expressed his dissatisfaction with the situation: "Too many decisions were made without a military input by the JCS.... All the Chiefs feel that they don't have much influence on policy." (16:3-4)

#### The Air War Decision

Although there had been disagreement among the military leaders on the method for dealing with North Vietnam, by the end of 1964 there was total agreement on

the bombing policy. They wanted to hit the North hard and keep on hitting it hard. They wanted to take advantage of mass, concentration, and surprise to defeat the North Vietnamese rapidly and decisively. (6:339)

The civilian advisers, however, believed that a moderate, graduated campaign would demonstrate our commitment to Hanoi, convince the North Vietnamese that whatever they did would be met with appropriate responses, and at the same time demonstrate US willingness to negotiate while simultaneously demonstrating US resolve. It seemed the rational way to conduct a limited war against a small enemy. Besides, a gradually escalating campaign against restricted targets could be easily controlled by the civilian experts in Washington. (12:211)

The generals and admirals considered these plans to be no better than academic exercises developed in operations research agencies and adopted by civilians who did not understand how to employ forces in war. (17:16) They argued that such a campaign would only allow the enemy to build up his defenses and to build alternate installations. It made no sense and would render air attacks ineffective. Rather than convey our resolve, it would demonstrate a hesitancy and a lack of commitment to Hanoi. Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief of Pacific Command, called the restricted campaign "a screwy set up, a screwy way to run a war....and utterly stupid." (18:5)

Despite the strength of their convictions, or perhaps because of it, the Joint Chiefs were to a large extent excluded from the high level decision making process that led to the February 1965, decision to launch the air war. They were allowed to see the President only twice in the months immediately before the decision was made. They wanted to present their case, but were blocked by civilian advisers. When they requested a meeting with the President, McNamara replied, "It's your constitutional right, but if I were you I wouldn't do it. He doesn't like you to come over and I can do it better for you." While they knew that was true, they did not believe that the Secretary would accurately convey their positions to the President. (11:593)

#### The Ground War Decision

In contrast, the decisions to commit ever increasing numbers of ground troops were dominated by the military, specifically by General Westmoreland in Saigon. It was somewhat anticlimactic, however, since the decision to put US forces into combat against the Communists had already been made. Unlike the air war situation, where Johnson and McNamara could review the daily target damage assessments and see the photographic results of their carefully controlled actions, the ground war remained a mystery to President Johnson and his advisers. Events moved too fast for the civilians in Washington to sit back and make clear, well planned choices. Each step led to another, even though



each step was initially viewed as an attempt to hold the line at that level. Despite fact-finding trips and countless messages back and forth, in the end their only real source on the situation in South Vietnam was Westmoreland. They had made the decision to go to war, now they relied on Westmoreland to define its size.

It is impossible to say with any certainty whether the conduct or the outcome of the Vietnam War would have been significantly different if the senior military leaders had been actively involved in the decision making process. It is certain, however, that the advice of the military leaders differed considerably from that of the civilian advisers on many issues, particularly on the proper application of military force. Right or wrong, the advice of the nation's military leaders should clearly have been included in such a critical national decision.

In retrospect, the exclusion of senior military advisers from critical decisions on whether and how to employ military forces seems at best foolish. Historian S. L. A. Marshall reports that Lyndon Johnson reached a similar conclusion after the heavy 1972 air attacks drove North Vietnam to negotiations. "In the last month of his life, it is said, LBJ told a confidant: 'I am aware of my main mistake in the war: I would not put enough trust in my military advisers.'" (6:342)

## CHAPTER IV

### MILITARY DISSENT

Despite the lack of an effective voice, there existed within the military considerable opposition to US policy in Vietnam. That opposition can be divided into two camps, those who thought the US should not be there in the first place, and those who did not like the way the war was conducted.

#### Opposition to US Involvement

The most esteemed senior military officer to oppose the use of US forces in Vietnam was General Matthew Ridgway. Through his combat record in World War II, his command of US forces in Korea, and his service as Chief of Staff of the Army he had earned a formidable reputation for directness, honesty, and professional competence. Although no longer in uniform by the time of the 1965 decisions, he had a long history of dealing with the Vietnam question.

He had first faced the issue of Vietnam as the Army Chief of Staff in 1954. The French war against the Viet Minh was going badly and the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu was in imminent danger. At that point, the government of France formally requested US intervention. Ridgway was adamantly opposed to such intervention because he felt Vietnam was outside the area of US national interest and he saw the extraordinary costs of winning such a war.

Concerned by the strong support for intervention from Secretary of State Dulles and JCS Chairman Admiral Radford, he personally sent a team of Army experts to Vietnam to evaluate the costs of intervention. Their report, which quantified a much larger cost than had been required in Korea, convinced President Eisenhower to abandon any plans for intervention. (19:276-7) Notably, Ridgway's report did not recommend against intervention; that was a political decision. He provided military information to the decision makers to let them know the cost of their decisions.

General Ridgway's views on Vietnam did not change through the years. His book on the Korean War, written in the mid-1960s, contained a chapter on Vietnam that concluded, "we should ask ourselves now if we are not, in this open-ended conflict, so impairing our strength through overdrawing on our resources -- political, economic, and military -- as to find ourselves unduly weakened when we need to meet new challenges in other more vital areas of the world." (20:250) In 1965 his views were often quoted, but he refused to publicly declare his disagreements. He felt since he held no public position and had no access to intelligence information he could not undermine the efforts of the current military leaders. (11:179)

Doubts about the Vietnam effort existed among those current leaders as well. Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson consistently expressed reservations about the

escalation, including the bombing. He expressed those doubts to two New York Times reporters in February 1965, saying that he had no great desire to go to war in Vietnam. He saw it as Korea all over again, a restricted war against an enemy with sanctuaries, where victory would be elusive if not impossible. (11:594-5) General Johnson's reluctance ended, however, with the incident described in Chapter II, where the President made it clear to him that the use of more force was the right answer.

A third prominent opponent of committing US forces to combat in Vietnam was none other than General Maxwell Taylor. He had been one of the original architects of President Kennedy's counterinsurgency plan, using American advisers to teach the Vietnamese themselves to fight the war. Although he shared Ridgway's concern about dissipating US strength elsewhere in the world, most of his concerns centered on his conviction that the war should remain Vietnamese.

In his autobiography he wrote. "I had no enthusiasm for the thought of using US Army forces in ground combat in this guerilla war. I doubted the adaptability of our large units to the requirements of jungle warfare." (3:238) Further, he feared the "adverse psychological reaction among the Vietnamese people to the reappearance of armed white men in their midst in apparent replacement of the hated French." (3:239) Most important, he feared that the South Vietnamese

would give up the fight and let the Americans do it for them. After the Marines landed at Da Nang in March 1965, he cabled the President of his "devout hope that we were not about to rush in and take over the conduct of the war from the Vietnamese." (3:338)

Taylor had even opposed the bombing campaign until the fall of 1964. However, after he took over as ambassador in Saigon and observed firsthand the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, and particularly after the attack on the US airmen at Bien Hoa on November 1, he became convinced that the US had to take action. On November 27 he went to Washington where he presented his plan for the two-phased limited bombing campaign. His support for the bombing was more political than military, however. He doubted that bombing in the restricted form that would be approved in Washington would significantly affect the war, but hoped it would send the right signals to both Saigon and Hanoi, buy time for the South Vietnamese government, and not involve the US taking over the war. (11:588)

After the bombing decision, Taylor continued to oppose the use of US ground combat units in South Vietnam, even the Marines to guard the air units at Da Nang. Before that March 1965 deployment he cabled the President: "Once this policy is breached, it will be very difficult to hold the line.... The French tried to adapt their forces to this mission and failed; I doubt that US forces could do much

better." (13:122) In his autobiography he expressed his dismay at the ensuing rapid escalation and his inability to control it: "When I left the President in Washington I had not realized that he had made up his mind on a number of important subjects.... Arriving in Saigon I soon sensed that, having crossed the Rubicon on February 7 [the bombing decision] he was now off for Rome on the double." (3:341)

#### Opposition to US Strategy

The majority of the military dissent, however, focused on how we were conducting the war. As was discussed in the last chapter, the majority of the senior military advisers were opposed to the restrictions and limitations placed on the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. As General LeMay put it, "We are swatting flies, when we ought to be going after the manure pile." (7:201) There was a strong unanimity among the admirals and generals on their feeling that the US should use the full extent of its conventional air power to end the war as decisively and rapidly as possible. That policy "was supported by every CINC and Chief without exception" according to Lieutenant General Glen Martin, the Pacific Air Forces Deputy for Operations in 1964-5. (22:486)

At the other end of the spectrum were some officers who favored less US force rather than more. Many of the officers who had served as advisers to South Vietnamese units felt the American emphasis should be on getting the

South Vietnamese to fight, hence more advisers and more US control of the fighting. The most vocal and best known of the advisers was Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, who had been the adviser to the South Vietnamese Seventh Division in the delta region. His version of the progress of the war and the performance of the South Vietnamese Army was so different from the official US Army version that the Saigon command directed that he not be debriefed on his return to Washington in May 1963. Determined to be heard, he told his story to anyone who would listen, up to and including the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, who scheduled Vann's briefing for the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff. After reviewing an advance copy, General Maxwell Taylor cancelled the briefing and it was never heard. (23:338)

At least one senior officer agreed with that position. General Jacob E. Smart, who was the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Air Forces in 1963 and 1964, had a unique perspective on Vietnam. As an operations officer for the Far Eastern Air Forces in 1951-55, he had worked closely with the French in Vietnam, had served in Hanoi, and had flown over Dien Bien Phu during the battle. He was convinced that the war in Vietnam could only be won politically, economically, and sociologically. He felt that combat use of US military forces in South Vietnam would only drive the people away from the government. He therefore advocated a concentrated advisory effort, using US

military and civic advisers to personally lead their Vietnamese counterparts in building a stable South Vietnamese nation. He openly expressed his theories, and because of his position, was able to discuss them with senior administration policy makers, including Secretaries Rusk and McNamara. He believed that his briefing on the subject to McNamara led to his being relieved of his command in 1964. (14:318)

The military, then, held a wide range of ideas on the use of US combat forces in Vietnam at the time of those decisions. What they had in common was that the US national security policy making apparatus was not listening.



## CHAPTER V

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Vietnam problem has been with us for a decade. The military today stand as responsible and accountable, and cannot blame McNamara, McGeorge Bundy or any other civilian as being totally responsible. In all those years, not one military man stood up and was heard opposing any of our actions, so silence means assent to most Americans. (9:6)

Vice Admiral John T. Hayward  
Former President, Naval War College

Regardless of reasons or circumstances, the fact remains that our senior military leaders were not full participants in the national security policy decision making process that led to the commitment of US combat forces in Vietnam. It was not because they had nothing to say. Those military leaders, while not always in full concurrence, had strong convictions that in many cases opposed the policies pursued by the administration. Their objections, however, were not heard by the President, nor by the Congress or the American people.

#### The Military's Responsibility

Our military leaders did not adequately speak out. General Bruce Palmer, who was the Army's Operations Deputy during the decision process, wrote in his book The 25-Year War, "the JCS apparently did not clearly and unequivocally tell the president and secretary of defense that the strategy was fatally flawed and that U.S. objectives were not achievable unless the strategy was changed." (2:201)

Admiral Sharp, the Commander in Chief in the Pacific, made the same point in Strategy For Defeat. "The JCS argued throughout against the restrained approach of gradualism. ...It was, and is, the Joint Chiefs' legal right to carry that argument directly to the President....they did not exercise this right to a sufficient extent." (4:268)

Admiral Sharp extended his criticism to other military leaders, including himself. "I think I should perhaps have injected myself, early on and more than once, into the Washington arena with personal briefings of the sort I gave to Secretary McNamara at Saigon in mid-1967. In any event, there is more than enough responsibility to go around for each to take his share." (4:268)

There were many reasons for going along quietly. General Palmer wrote "The only explanation for this failure is that the chiefs were imbued with the 'can do' spirit and could not bring themselves to make such a negative statement or to appear to be disloyal." (2:46) Other logical and even admirable reasons have been proposed: the constitutional obligation to carry out the lawful directives of the civilian leadership, personal loyalty to the Commander in Chief, the chance to favorably influence subsequent events, and the possibility that military opposition would be written off by the public and the Congress as grandiose war-mongering. (1:166)

No matter how noble the reason, however, the final result was that US military forces were committed to war using a strategy that our senior military leadership believed to be wrong.

#### Can It Happen Again?

It would be easy to say that the personalities and circumstances of the time were so unique that such a situation could never happen again. After all, the national security policy apparatus of 1965 was the result of a carefully chosen team of liberal, intellectual advisers, picked because they reflected the thinking of President Kennedy, but serving a new President of completely different outlook and personality, who for some reason chose not to replace these advisers with his own people.

On the other hand, there is certainly no shortage of strong personalities and equally strong ideas in the political arena. A domineering Secretary of Defense with little military experience and the ear of the President would not be rare. An inherent distrust of the senior military leadership is not uncommon. Combine those in the right proportions and the nation could very well find itself in a situation where the military is again excluded from the national security policy making process.

The lesson of this study, then, must be that our senior military leaders must not allow such a situation to develop. Neither the Congress nor the American public want

a military leadership that is nothing but a rubber stamp for administration policies.

#### Recommendations

If our military leadership is to play an effective role in the formulation of national security policy they must be heard by the President, the Congress, and the people of the United States. The military has a legitimate advisory role in the policy process and it should be executed thoroughly. Such military advice need not in any way undermine or threaten the constitutional provisions for civilian control of the military. The decisions of the civilian government must be followed conscientiously by the military, but the military must insure that those civilian decision makers have the benefit of competent professional military judgment.

Such military advice, however, cannot begin at the time of a crisis. The attitudes and perceptions of civilian policy makers toward the military are formed during the day-to-day routines of peacetime government. The military cannot expect to emerge as trusted advisers in times of crisis if their routine advice has not already earned the respect and confidence of the decision makers. Senior military leaders must remember that every bit of testimony, advice, or counsel that they present helps build the trust that will permit them to participate effectively in national security policy making.

While some of the limits on the military's advisory role in 1965 were due to personalities and circumstances, the legislative authority for that advisory role made the constraint of the military's advice possible. The legislation establishing our defense structure, primarily the National Security Acts of 1947 and 1949 and the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, gave the advisory role to the JCS as a corporate entity. It stipulated that this committee would submit a unanimous position. (24:129) This requirement, combined with the domination of General Maxwell Taylor, a Chairman who was appointed because of his political compatibility with the Kennedy administration, made difficult any dissent from other JCS members. Further, the legislation clearly subordinated the military advisers to the Secretary of Defense, a combination that permitted Secretary McNamara's policies that military advice should be submitted through him, rather than directly to the President or Congress.

While the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act made some improvement in the military's advisory role, it left some major problems. The addition of the JCS Chairman to the National Security Council is a positive step, and the strengthening of the Chairman's position will guarantee the military one strong voice in policy councils. That strengthening, however, may have come at the expense of the service chiefs' advisory

role. The chiefs must provide their advice through the Chairman, except when making recommendations to the Congress or upon request of higher authority. (24:133) Also, although the Act greatly increases the authority of the worldwide combatant Commanders in Chief (CINC Europe, CINC Pacific, etc.), it gives them no statutory advisory role, even for issues within their areas of responsibility.

To prevent the subordination or exclusion of the military in national security policy decision making, Congress should draft new legislation to address these problems. This new law should specifically define an advisory role for all members of the JCS on national security matters. It should further provide for an advisory role for the combatant CINCs on matters pertaining to their areas of responsibility. Such legislation must also clearly authorize these military leaders access to the President and to Congress to present their advice. Although today's environment encourages the free exchange of military advice, circumstances in the future may not. This proposed legislation should insure that the military will always have a voice in critical national security decisions.

Although an articulate, actively involved military leadership and a legislative structure that encourages its participation are essential to insuring a full role for the military in the national security policy process, they can provide only part of the solution. Equally essential are

civilian leaders who appreciate the complexity of defense issues and recognize the need for military advice. Congress must seek the testimony of senior military leaders on national security issues and make sure that administration policies reflect that advice. Executive branch policy makers must understand that today's professional military officers are prepared to provide valuable counsel that is indispensable for national security policy decisions. Only when the civilian leadership is willing to listen can the military fulfill its obligation to the decision making process.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The decisions to commit US forces to combat in Vietnam were made without the full counsel of the nation's senior military leadership. The reasons for their exclusion from the policy making process were complex, involving the policies of civilian decision makers in the Johnson administration, an unwillingness on the part of the military leaders to speak out, and legislative shortfalls. While the tragedy of the Vietnam war cannot be blamed on the lack of a military voice in the initial decisions, it was certainly a contributing factor. The results of that failure remain very much a part of today's national security environment. As Admiral Crowe puts it, "I don't believe any decision is made today on force commitments without thinking of Vietnam." (10:74) If the military are to play an effective role in national security policy decision making, their advice must be heard.



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